

INSIDE JAPAN

SMALL GROUP TOUR

A Northern Soul

14 NIGHTS

CLASSIC



Tour overview

The northern reaches of Japan's main island hold some of the country's most beguiling attractions: rugged national parks, mountaintop temple communities, and enchanting hot spring villages. A Northern Soul tour introduces some of these hidden delights, revealing a side of Japan rarely seen by outsiders.

The region of Tohoku lies north of Tokyo, stretching all the way up to the tip of Honshu Island and encompassing six prefectures. This is one of the most remote regions in Japan, with a reputation for stunning scenery, deep winters, and exceptionally warm hospitality – and until 2011 it was a name virtually unknown to the outside world.

Then, on the 11th of March, this unassuming region suddenly found itself at the centre of the world's attention thanks to the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. To help you understand the effects of the earthquake, the tour will include a visit and stay in one of the towns worst affected by the tsunami, where you'll have the chance to learn about what happened in the region, meet local people whose lives were affected by the disaster and support the region through your visit.

Tohoku is a truly beautiful region and this tour is packed with stunning locations and fascinating cultural experiences – including several World Heritage Sites. As part of this tour you'll visit beautiful Matsushima Bay, considered one of the top three scenic views in Japan; historic Hiraizumi, whose golden temple rivals Kinkaku-ji in Kyoto for brilliance; and Naruko Onsen, a charming onsen town where hot spring steam billows through the wood-panelled streets. Outside of the Tohoku region you'll also visit the monumentally elaborate temples of Nikko, final resting place of Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, and the abandoned gold mines of Sado Island, a rural isle known for its world-famous taiko drummers.

This is a fantastic itinerary taking you well off the beaten path into Japan's magical northern areas. Though most of Tohoku was completely untouched by the disaster of 2011, the whole region has suffered the effects of a decline in tourism to the area, so your presence will be greatly appreciated by the hotels, inns, restaurants and museums we'll visit on the tour.



Highlights

Take a boat trip through Matsushima Bay, one of Japan's top three scenic views

Learn about the effects of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Ishinomaki in the Sanriku Coast region

Admire Japan's most ostentatious religious architecture in Nikko

Have a go at taiko drumming in its spiritual home, Sado Island

Try your hand at paper-making

Visit the ancient temples of Hiraizumi, Kyoto's former rival in the north

Classic tours

Mid-range tours that cover Japan's classic sights or interest-specific itineraries (e.g. hiking, cultural activities, specific regions)

- Three /four-star accommodation
- En suite rooms in all locations (except at some unique traditional accommodation)
- Airport meet-and-greet and transfers
- Breakfast every day plus some lunches & dinners
- Selected entrance fees included
- Solo travellers: a single room is available throughout on payment of a mandatory supplement

Day by day

Many of our customers choose to arrive a day or two early to get over jet-lag and get the most out of the tour. Whatever the case, we will be happy to make arrangements to suit your needs.



Day 1 – Tokyo

On arrival at either Narita or Haneda Airport in Tokyo, you will travel by shared shuttle bus to your hotel in Asakusa, Tokyo's most traditional district. Here you'll meet your tour leader and have the chance to begin getting to know your travel companions. Asakusa is a fascinating and very accessible district of Tokyo, known for the bright-red Senso-ji Temple, its many market stalls, and Kappabashi-dori ("Kitchen Street"). This is a fantastic place to begin your trip to Japan, and this evening your tour leader will take you out for a welcome meal at one of the area's many excellent restaurants.

Day 2 – Tokyo

Having recharged your batteries with a good night's sleep, your tour leader will take you on a tour of the city using public transport – including famous spots such as the Shibuya scramble crossing, the crazy shopping streets of Harajuku, and Akihabara "electric town". You'll also visit serene Hamarikyū Gardens, an oasis of calm in the midst of the hubbub, for an alternative perspective on the city.

Day 3 – Nikko

You will take the train direct from Asakusa to Nikko, just a couple of hours' north of Tokyo yet worlds away in character and charm. This World Heritage Site is the final resting place of Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of Japan's greatest shogunate, and exhibits some of the most impressive traditional architecture found anywhere in Japan. After checking in at your accommodation, you will be met by our expert local guide for a full day's tour of the area's most impressive sites. This is sure to include Tokugawa's mausoleum, the "three wise monkeys" carving from the proverb "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" and a cable car ride where you can watch Nikko pass below you through mountaneous terrain.

Day 4 Nikko

Today we have a full day to really explore the national park, with its winning combination of deep forest, beautiful lakes, impressive waterfalls and steaming hot springs. We'll have a private bus at our disposal to take us to some of the area's most scenic spots – including the Akechidaira Plateau and Kegon Falls – or you are welcome to strike out independently for an invigorating day of hiking.

Day 5 Hiraizumi

After checking in at your accommodation in Hiraizumi, you will head out with your tour leader to visit Chuson-ji, the town's most famous temple.

Chuson-ji is set in beautiful woodland and once comprised an extensive complex of buildings, but today there are just two – one of which, Konjikido, is entirely covered in gold like Kyoto's famous pavilion.

In Hiraizumi you'll be staying at a Japanese-style hotel, where a traditional multi-course meal will be served on the first night of your stay.

Day 6 Hiraizumi

In the 12th century, during the Heian Period, Hiraizumi was the seat of the powerful Fujiwara clan and rivaled imperial Kyoto in importance. A glimpse of its former glory remains in its beautiful temples and shrines, the most impressive in the Tohoku region and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Today, you'll have a full day to explore the Hiraizumi region. Enjoy a scenic boat ride through the Geibikei Gorge, visit the Yugendo Caves, and take part in a traditional paper-making workshop. In the afternoon, you can visit Motsu-ji Temple, stroll through the town, or take part in an optional lantern painting experience at Hiraizumi-ya, which takes 1–2 hours.

This evening, indulge in another group dinner.

Day 7 Naruko Onsen

Today you'll transfer by private coach from Hiraizumi to Naruko Onsen, a charming traditional town known for its nine different hot springs – each with its own mineral composition, and reputed health benefits.

The day begins with a hands-on tatami-making experience, where you'll craft a miniature tatami mat to take home. Next, visit the Izunuma Sanctuary Center to learn about the local wildlife in the Ramsar-listed wetlands of Izunuma and Uchinuma. You'll then take part in a mochi-making masterclass, guided by a local women's association, before continuing to Naruko Gorge.

After exploring the gorge, visit Jigokudani, where you can walk among bubbling hot spring waters before reboarding the bus for a short trip to the nearby geyser. From there, continue to Naruko Dam, where you can enjoy spectacular views.

Time and weather permitting, you'll then visit Katanuma Caldera Lake, a brilliantly colored acidic lake in a volcanic crater. Here, you'll have the option to rent a rowboat.

Following the lake visit, you'll transfer by bus to your traditional ryokan inn, where a delicious kaiseki dinner will be served.

Day 8 Sanriku Coast

On the 11th of March 2011, Tohoku was struck by the largest earthquake in Japan's history, triggering a massive tsunami that devastated the region's eastern coast. Kesennuma Koyo High School was heavily damaged, with most of its four-story concrete structure submerged. Eight years later, it reopened as the Kesennuma City Memorial Museum, an impressive yet sobering site that serves as both a memorial to the disaster and a reminder of the ever-present threat of tsunamis. You'll visit with a private guide who will provide insight into the events of that day and the resilience of the local community.

Though it's certainly sobering subject matter, the warmth and generosity of the people of Kesennuma will ensure that your stay here is a highlight of your trip – and you will be left in no doubt that your visit is vastly appreciated.

In the afternoon, you can choose to tour a sake brewery, visit the Rias Ark Museum of Art, or relax at a craft beer brewery and café in the port area.

Day 9 Sendai

Today we will travel by private coach from Kesennuma to Matsushima Bay, an ocean inlet studded with leafy islands which is officially designated one of the Nihon San-Kei, or 'Three Great Sights of Japan'. You'll explore the area by boat, visiting some of the bay's scenic piers and islands, as well as the lovely Entsuin Temple Gardens. After the day's sightseeing you'll take the train onwards to Sendai, where the rest of the afternoon will be at leisure to enjoy the city.

Sendai is known by the locals as the 'city of trees' for its wild, tree-lined avenues and spacious parks, one of the more positive outcomes of the heavy bombardment the city suffered in WWII. As the capital of the north it has the best restaurant scene and nightlife in Tohoku, as well as plenty of excellent shops and galleries, so you'll have no problem entertaining yourself for the remainder of the day.

Day 10 Niigata

This morning, if you have time, you can choose to visit the Sendai morning market, before jumping onboard your coach again for the journey from east to west.

In Zao Onsen you'll stop at a local dairy farm, meet the farm's cows and try your hand at making (and tasting) ice cream, while at Togatta Onsen you'll stop to give your feet a rest in the ashiyu hot spring foot bath. From here, the 'Zao Echo Line' road will lead you past spectacular waterfalls and mountains to Kattadake Peak, which boasts stunning views over the Okama Crater Lake and its mysterious colour-changing waters. Your final destination today is Niigata, a sizeable city on Japan's western coast.

Day 11 Niigata

Continue your exploration of the west coast with a day of sightseeing in and around Niigata, including the beautiful Saito Family Summer Villa – an opulent example of turn-of-the-century Japanese architecture, a visit to the pretty Hakusan Park, and a spot of shopping at Honcho Market. The afternoon will be at leisure for you to spend as you choose; your tour leader will have some excellent suggestions as to how best to spend your time.

Day 12 Sado Island

You will be picked up by taxi from your Niigata hotel and driven to the port, where you'll catch the ferry to Sado Island. Sado's remote location

made it the perfect place for Japanese rulers to send dissenting politicians, artists, and other prominent figures – beginning with a poet in 722 and concluding almost a millennium later in 1700. During this time, Sado became home to banished emperors, monks and aristocrats alike, developing its own religious and cultural scene whose influence is still evident today.

On arrival on Sado you will meet your local guide, who will be with you for two full days to help you get beneath the surface of this remarkable island. Travelling in a private minibus, first you'll explore the Old Fishing Street and ride in a distinctive tub boat, later on you'll get the chance to learn about Sado's other most famous export: taiko drumming. Taiko is enjoyed throughout Japan, but Sado's taiko group, Kodo, is the most famous – having toured extensively through Japan, Europe and the US. You'll get a chance to have a go yourself with a lesson today. You'll arrive at your accommodation in time for the included dinner.

Day 13 Sado Island

On your second full day on Sado, you'll visit the gold mine museum. Gold was discovered here 400 years ago and briefly made Sado the largest gold producer in the world. After learning about the mining process, you'll pay a visit to the Sado Bugyosho, or former magistrate's office, from where the mining operation was governed. The rest of the day will be spent exploring a few more of the island's attractions, including a visit to the Ibis Sanctuary, and a tour of the local sake brewery. Today you'll return to the accommodation with plenty of time to relax and enjoy the hot spring bath.

Day 14 Tokyo

You'll board the ferry once more for the journey back to Niigata, where you'll catch a taxi to the station and jump on the bullet train to Tokyo. Japan's Shinkansen is an experience in itself, and you're bound to enjoy zipping through the countryside as you return to Tokyo to conclude your trip.

For your final tour night, you'll be staying in Shinjuku – one of Tokyo's brightest, most exciting entertainment districts, crowded with skyscrapers packed to the rafters with bars, shops, restaurants and karaoke booths. This is the perfect place to head out and make the most of your last few hours in Japan – and it's well connected to every other part of the city, so if there's one last museum you want to squeeze in or a special souvenir you'd like to seek out, this is the time to do it. Head out with your tour leader and group members for a farewell dinner. The perfect time to swap all your favourite memories of your trip.

Day 15 Tour Ends

Your adventure comes to a close and you'll bid farewell to your tour leader and travelling companions as you make your way to the airport by shared shuttle bus. We hope you'll be back soon!

Our tours aim to be as flexible as possible, so there is no set-in-stone itinerary for each day. You will be provided on the ground with Day-by-Day sheets and the tour leader will outline what they are going to do each day in detail. If you would like to break away from the group and do something different, they will be available to offer advice, and help you plan your day.

Where you'll stay

Please note that accommodation is subject to change. Final details of the accommodation will be included in your Info-Pack, which will be sent out approximately four weeks before departure. If you'd like to know more, please speak to your travel consultant.

● TOKYO

Asakusa View Hotel Annex Rokku

A stone's throw from Senso-ji Temple – the heart of Asakusa – Asakusa View Hotel Annex Rokku is a great base for exploring both the local area and Tokyo as a whole. Just minutes from the iconic Kaminarimon gate, the hotel is also well connected by subway and train lines, making travel effortless. Guest rooms offer a comfortable stay with all the essentials. The top-floor lounge provides a relaxing space with views across Asakusa towards the towering Skytree. With a wide variety of restaurants nearby, dining options are never in short supply. Throughout the property, murals inspired by traditional Japanese theatre, such as Noh and Kabuki, add a cultural touch to the decor.

● NIKKO

Nikko Chuzenji Kanaya Hotel

Set on the forested shores of Lake Chuzenji in Nikko National Park, the Nikko Chuzenji Kanaya Hotel offers a peaceful retreat surrounded by natural scenery. The hotel is Western-style in character, with comfortable rooms that look out over the lake or surrounding woodland. Its location close to Lake Chuzenji and the nearby walking trails and waterfalls makes it an excellent base for exploring the Oku-Nikko area. The hotel also features hot spring bathing facilities, including an open-air bath set among the trees.

● HIRAIZUMI

Hotel Musashibo

This Japanese style hotel is a 15 minute walk or a short taxi ride from Hiraizumi train station. The hotel is next to Motsu-ji temple and a 30 minute walk to Chuson-ji temple. Meals are served in the "Benkei" restaurant which prides itself on providing guests with freshly cooked meals featuring regional specialities such as locally farmed beef. One of the most attractive features of the Musashibo are the hot spring baths – one of which overlooks a small Japanese garden.

● NARUKO ONSEN

Kameya Hotel

Kameya Hotel is in the small hot spring town of Naruko Onsen in the north of Miyagi, and it sits between the hills and the river. The rooms are all Japanese-style with tatami flooring and comfortable futon bedding, and they have a small seating area by the window and a flat screen TV. Each room has its own bathroom, but there are communal hot spring baths on the first and sixth floors with both indoor and outdoor baths. There is a large tatami floor dining room with Western-style tables and chairs where all guests eat, and breakfast includes both traditional Japanese cuisine and Western dishes. The hotel also has a karaoke room, a gift shop offering Miyagi souvenirs, and a little ramen corner where you can enjoy a late night snack.

What's included

- ✓ Your InsideJapan Info-Pack
- ✓ Airport transfers by shared bus
- ✓ 14 nights' accommodation
- ✓ Breakfast every day, one lunch and eight evening meals
- ✓ Full-time services of your InsideJapan tour leader
- ✓ All transport between destinations in Japan, including airport transfers
- ✓ IC transport card with 3,000 yen credit for city transport
- ✓ Entry to Hamarikyū Gardens in Tokyo
- ✓ Full day private guide service in Nikko
- ✓ Entrance fees for temples and shrines in Nikko
- ✓ Taxi from Ichinoseki Station to accommodation in Hiraizumi
- ✓ Loop bus pass for transport in Hiraizumi
- ✓ Day trip to the Yugendo Caves, including boat trip & paper-making workshop
- ✓ Mini-Tatami making experience and Mochi and Hatto soup experience
- ✓ Luggage forwarding from Tokyo to Hiraizumi, and Niigata to Tokyo
- ✓ Brewery Tour at Otokoyama Sake brewery
- ✓ Kesenuma City Memorial Museum with local guide
- ✓ Sightseeing tour of Matsushima Bay
- ✓ Dairy visit & ice cream making in Zao Onsen
- ✓ Two full days' private guide service on Sado Island
- ✓ Entrance fees for two days' sightseeing on Sado Island
- ✓ Taiko drumming experience on Sado
- ✓ Shared portable Wi-Fi access throughout trip

Not included

- ✗ International flights
- ✗ Any local transport (subways, taxis, buses) unless covered by the included transport passes
- ✗ Baggage handling and luggage forwarding unless otherwise specified
- ✗ Any entrance fees (including those for museums, temples & shrines) unless otherwise specified

Where you'll stay

● SANRIKU COAST

Kesennuma Plaza Hotel

Conveniently located near Kesennuma Station, Kesennuma Plaza Hotel offers a comfortable stay overlooking the scenic Kesennuma Bay. Its proximity to the bustling Kesennuma Fish Market and local attractions makes it an ideal base for enjoying the area. Guests can unwind in the hotel's natural hot spring bath, 'Puka Puka Onsen,' which allows for a unique floating experience due to its high salinity. Dining options showcase the region's seafood, with specialties like swordfish, served in the on-site restaurant offering views of the bay.

● SENDAI

Vista Sendai

The Vista Hotel Sendai is a great base for exploring the city as well as the surrounding areas, being only a few minutes' walk from Sendai station. As with any mid-range hotel in Japan, rooms are compact but modern and comfortable, and the hotel has some great facilities such as the public hot spring baths and coin-operated laundry facilities. After several Japanese-style stays, we're sure you'll appreciate the buffet breakfast of Western dishes. There are plenty of restaurants nearby for dinner as well.

● NIIGATA

ANA Crowne Plaza Niigata

The ANA Crowne Plaza Niigata is a modern, Western-style hotel offering a comfortable and reliable base in the city. The hotel is conveniently located within easy reach of JR Niigata Station and the city's main dining and shopping areas. Guests can enjoy a generous breakfast buffet featuring a mix of Japanese and Western dishes, served in one of the hotel's on-site restaurants.

● SADO ISLAND

Yoshidaya Ryokan

This ryokan Hotel has a wonderful view Lake Kamo. There are 70 Japanese-style rooms, and each guest room has its own private bath and toilet. The hotel has hot spring baths for both women and men and on the roof there are outdoor hot spring baths with a commanding lake view. Fresh locally caught seafood will be the dish of the day here!

● TOKYO

Hyatt Regency Tokyo

Situated in Shinjuku's major commercial district, the Hyatt Regency Tokyo offers a refined and comfortable stay in one of the city's most dynamic areas. Overlooking Shinjuku Central Park, the hotel provides spacious, well-appointed rooms with a sense of calm rarely found in such a central location. Its position offers excellent access to transport links, as well as Shinjuku's shopping, dining and entertainment districts. Dining options range from dynamic open-kitchen restaurants to relaxed lounges, while leisure facilities include a spa, fitness centre and tranquil spaces to unwind after a busy day of sightseeing..



Important tour information



Fitness

Even when not using public transport, sightseeing in Japan often involves walking between sights, climbing up steps in temples and being 'on the go' for much of the day. To enjoy any of our Small Group Tours you should be of moderate fitness, able to walk and climb stairs without difficulty and able to maintain a pace that is comfortable for the majority of the group.

Dietary Requirements

There are a number of meals included on all our tours. Please let us know in advance if you have any special dietary requirements and we will try to ensure that included meals meet these needs.

In addition, please note that dietary requirements (such as vegetarianism, gluten-free diets and even some allergies) are very uncommon in Japan so meals for those with specific requirements may be simpler and less varied.

On this tour you'll stay at a number of Japanese style accommodation, you will be served a traditional dinner, as well as a Japanese breakfast in the morning.

En suite / shared facilities

We aim to secure rooms at all accommodation with attached en-suite facilities. Culturally, communal bathing is common practice in Japan. Shared facilities (when included) will always be separated by gender.

Policy on single rooms

Single rooms are guaranteed at all night stops on this tour through payment of a mandatory single supplement.

Double rooms

Please note that in Japan, twin rooms are very much the norm, and there are far fewer double rooms available. Please understand that on this tour we are not able to offer double rooms at any of the locations.

Your tour leader

Our tours are led on the ground by a fluent English speaker, now a resident of Japan and able to speak Japanese. They are there to ensure that you get the most out of your trip and that the whole adventure goes smoothly. The tour leader travels with the group and stays at the same hotels and ryokan, so please feel free to ask for help or advice at any time.

Your tour leader is not a guide so may not know every historical detail of every shrine, temple or palace, yet they are available pretty much all day every day and will even be happy to accompany tour members out at night on occasion!

Please note that the tour leader reserves the right to deny participation in an activity if they feel that it is in the safety or best interest of you and/or any other members of the group. Similarly, dangerous weather conditions may lead to cancellation of such an activity.

Luggage

We highly recommend that to make your stay more enjoyable you pack reasonably light. Large suitcases will be an inconvenience to you as you will have to carry your bags for short distances at times and some stations do not have escalators or elevators/lifts.

For ease of transit, we will be forwarding your luggage on two occasions and will be without your main bag for 2 nights in Nikko, 1 night in Ishinomaki and 2 nights on Sado Island.

You will need a small overnight bag (e.g. backpack) for use when we forward our main bags to the next location.

Transport on tour

We will be using several modes of transport on this tour including private minibuses, ferry, taxis, trains and jet foil rides - as well as making use of Japan's first-rate rail network.

International Flights

This tour starts and finishes in Tokyo for arrivals and departures at Tokyo Narita Airport or Tokyo Haneda Airport. Please note that the included meet-and-greet and airport transfer to the first hotel is ONLY available from these two airports.

Check-in

Upon arrival you will probably be tired after a long international flight. Please note that rooms at the Tokyo hotel are only available from 3pm.

Hotels in Japan operate strict check-in policies.

If you have an early arrival you can either book an extra night for any-time check-in, or the hotel will be happy to securely store your luggage for you whilst you go for a drink or explore the local area.

The tour leader will be staying at the first hotel for two nights before the tour starts so they will be available for advice if you choose to book pre tour nights. We recommend booking at least one extra night to check in and relax before the tour begins.